

We are nearing a year since the opening of the National Museum of Contemporary Art (MNAC). There have been, and continue to be voices contesting its location, and/or questioning its curatorial policy.

I won't address again the location question, beyond reminding that the remodeling of this part of the building did not entail the use of funds from the Ministry of Culture, and was made possible through governmental funds allotted for the completion of the construction of the Parliament; and adding that even though the proximity with the Parliament is not, overall, a very friendly one, and hasn't yet led to a solution to the problem of independent access, and to the reshaping, according to the initial project, of the section of the park in front of the museum, there have been no political interferences whatsoever in the professional activity of the museum.

Since its opening the museum organized a number of events that are indicative of some of its team's concerns: to promote new artistic practices; to bring to Romania exhibitions of contemporary art from abroad, and to familiarize the Romanian public with recent artistic trends; to retrieve, and show to the public, works by significant artists active during the last decades; to revisit critically the official art of the late communist period; to show works by Romanian artists established abroad; to organize events that would make of the museum an attractive meeting place for the young generation.

Ever since the museum's opening, and even before it, there has been a vague, but perceptible pressure, a more or less explicit expectation that the museum become a place where the activity of the artists present on the Romanian art scene during the 70-90 would be enshrined. Many of them had formed a certain idea about this museum, and feel that their expectations have been frustrated. This was made particularly manifest by the exhibition recently organized at the *Galateca* art gallery. Whether explicit or implicit, such expectations have prompted us to take a step that might lead to a clearer understanding of the role a museum of contemporary art might play in the present context in this country.

We find it appropriate to recall that before the opening of the museum we organized in the exhibition halls of the National Theater and at *Kalinderu Medialab* an exhibition entitled *Preview*. We were hoping then that those interested in the future museum will react with criticism and suggestions that might have contributed to the defining of the museum's policy. This did not happen. It may well be that the absence of a clear relationship between the selection presented at that time and the location of the museum to be (as well as the fact that critical attention was first and foremost focused on the question of its location) made things appear devoid of relevance or urgency. We are now attempting again, in a somewhat different manner, but with similar intentions, this exercise.

What you are conveyed to view here **is not an exhibition**. It is a manner of making accessible to the public, the artists and the specialists the contents of the museum's storage. Under the present conditions, ensuring complete access to the storages is impossible; what we are showing is, however, a significant percentage of the works in our holdings, by far superior to that shown in the *Preview* exhibition, an amount we find telling enough for their content.

You will have noticed that we are avoiding the term "collection"; an explanation for this avoidance is in order. The sum total of the works in MNAC's care is the result of a process of acquisitions that is, in our opinion, symptomatic for an anomalous relationship between the state and the artists, where both partners perpetuate outdated habits. In the absence of a normal art market, the state continues to be the major art buyer. It plays this role by resorting to procedures established before 89, even though its motives are no longer the same. Buying art is no longer a means of ideological pressure, of control and manipulation of a professional community. The political clientele still on the lookout for privileges, here as in other places, is a phenomenon of a different nature. Renouncing such motivations without being driven by others, without the inspiration of a

project of some kind, the state manifests itself as a patron unconcerned by the results of its patronage; this, with the doubly negative effect of being, despite the relative modesty of its investments in art, an excessively powerful player on an as yet weak market, and of perpetuating the addiction of the artists to these periodical intakes of "oxygen", meant to act as ineffectual corrections for their precarious financial status. In turn, the artists continue to have this kind of expectations from the state; knowing, however, that the funds are limited, and the acquisitions are never accompanied by real promotion, they tend to offer for acquisition, more often than not, works that are not among those they consider particularly significant or valuable. Mention should be made of the existence of a mediating body between the two partners: the "commission of evaluation and art acquisitions", including representatives of the Artists' Union, the Art University, the Institute of Art History of the Romanian Academy, independent critics and representatives of the Ministry of Culture. In the absence of any clearly stated intentions on the part of the state, and confronted with the mediocre, though numerically excessive (given the limited funds) offers of the artists, this body has been usually unable to do much more than seek acceptable compromises. For its last meeting, in 2002, when MNAC had already been set up as an institution, this commission included a representative of it, and an effort was made to select works that could become part of a plausible collection for a museum of contemporary art. Though the selection was made, and the prices set, the works chosen during this session have not been acquired to this date.

Out of the works bought in this fashion during the period 1990-2001 (and which have been until 2001 in the care of the Office for Documentation and Art Exhibitions, and were transferred, through a purely bureaucratic decision, to the care of the Museum of Contemporary Art), a significant part was distributed over the years, before the setting up of the Museum, to the network of museums throughout the country, and to a number of state institutions, such as the Parliament, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (and through it, to the embassies and Romanian cultural institutes abroad), down to the Head Office of the Militia.

The works that are at this moment physically in our storages are thus the result (not to say the residue) of a combination between a rather haphazard process of acquisition, and a no less haphazard process of distribution. Their number and variety is large enough to give some sort of idea about the Romanian art scene after 89; but to organize, out of them, a coherent exhibition, would mean to burden the museum with a ballast, to encumber it with a pseudo-collection that could only lead to versions of the annual "salons". These works do not form a fund that would make possible the organizing of exhibitions truly relevant for the artistic trends of the last two decades; they do not include, for most of the artists represented, examples that would enable us to show appropriately what they have been about. One of the questions on which we are inviting you to help us reflect is this: should a museum of contemporary art be the indiscriminate keeper of a variety of artistic productions of unequal quality over a specific time-span? A related question would be: if the museum is to be the keeper of at least some of these productions, for how long? Shouldn't the possibility of transferring the works of artists no longer alive to a National Gallery be taken into account?

One should not confuse contemporary art with the production of artists active at a certain time; it is a commonplace I feel obliged to reassert here. A clarification of critical terms (what is modern, what is contemporary etc.) would undoubtedly be useful, but I am convinced that it would not be conducive to unanimous views concerning the relationship between concepts, and works that might illustrate them. I don't think we can dispense with criteria of value – or relevance – in setting up a collection for the museum; and I feel moved to add that such criteria should also be at work in the case of productions claiming to belong to the newest trends, which isn't, in itself, reason enough to include them in a museum of contemporary art. Being in a position to select in the name of the museum's strategy works we believe to be significant for present-day art puts the museum team in a difficult position: to select is an exercise in power, and claiming it might be seen as a presumption. It is, however, unavoidable for a team to take on this responsibility, this risk, on condition that it remains aware of the difficulties and traps

such an exercise entails. To put it briefly, the museum needs to have the means for setting up a collection that could deservedly be called so. It can accomplish this in consultation with an international board (which we already formed), and with a commission of local independent specialists. It is essential for the museum to be able to rely on a stable budget that would enable it to make medium and long-term projects. The existence of active private galleries, with an already established reputation as promoters of contemporary art, the circulation of ideas through art journals, on the internet etc. is certain to constitute an increasingly important factor in balancing what might be perceived as a preoccupying dominance of the Museum of Contemporary Art on the Romanian art scene.

We have been accused of privileging the new media over the more traditional ones. It is not the nature of the media that appears to us decisive, but the quality of ideas they carry. The works in our holdings are predominantly in the category of traditional media. This is due to the fact that the state's – very circumspect – readiness to acquire examples of new media works is a very recent phenomenon. Even though the physical limitations of the space precluded showing all we have at this time in our holdings, what you can see here is a variety of manners of grouping, rather than a selection. We sketched a few possibilities of giving access to the works, while deliberately refraining from giving them a more definite shape. We were selective only to the extent needed to downplay the congestion inherent to storing, that would have made the individual works invisible, and to suggest possible curatorial discourses, without carrying them to completion; with what we have, this would have been impossible. With some of these discourses we are resolutely at odds. For instance, it would be simple to hang or arrange the works according to the obsolete model of the "salon". In its present state, this "collection" seems to dictate such a model. It is a model we hint at, only in order to reject it, to make manifest its inappropriateness. An informed visitor will no doubt perceive allusions, ironical comments, even quotations from exhibitions recently organized in the museum itself, and in other places. The fact that some of the works are hung, while others are just stored does not indicate value discrimination; it is merely a solution of convenience, adopted in order to show as many works as possible.

The solution to which we chose to resort is an implicit invitation addressed to the public and the specialists to handle the storing frames, and to imagine, taking as a starting point the works they will find there, a variety of configurations. It is, at the same time, an invitation addressed to independent curators to come up with proposals of curatorial discourses. The scientific council of the museum is ready and willing to take them into consideration.

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